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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 001496

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MCAP](#) [RS](#)

SUBJECT: RUMORS OF DEFENSE MINISTER OUSTER DISCOUNTED

REF: MOSCOW 652

Classified By: Acting Political M/C David Kostelancik. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Local press reported that Defense Minister Serdyukov would be dismissed from his post and made Head of the Federal Customs Service (FTS), to be replaced by someone from within the Defense Ministry. A working group of Duma Deputies and military experts submitted a report to Medvedev and Putin calling for the roll-back of many of Serdyukov's reforms. Press reports indicate the Security Council may meet and call for slowing down the pace of military reform. CHOD Makarov's tough-talking June 5 press conference, however, suggested that the need for military reform is as urgent as ever. Experts doubt that Serdyukov's position is in jeopardy, and argue that military reform will continue. End Summary.

Rumors Serdyukov Will Soon Leave

12. (U) On May 26 local press reported that Minister of Defense Anatoliy Serdyukov would be removed from his position and become the Head of the FTS. This would happen not because many soldiers are opposed to Serdyukov's military reforms, but because his skills as a reformer would be put to use reforming the FTS, according to the press. Nezavisimaya Gazeta reported one of his main duties would be to be in charge of expediting the creation of the much-discussed customs union with Belarus and Kazakhstan. According to the press, someone from within the Ministry of Defense would succeed Serdyukov.

13. (U) Presidential Press Secretary Natalya Timakova, however, said "rumors about Defense Minister Serdyukov's dismissal are just rumors. He will continue in his job, and there are no questions about this."

Duma Deputies Unhappy With Military Reforms

14. (U) On May 29 a working group of State Duma Deputies and military experts, originally set up in November 2008, delivered a report to Medvedev and Putin that called for rolling back Serdyukov's "baseless" reforms. The report argued that the Russian army must retain its four-tier command structure, as opposed to a three-tier command structure as Serdyukov decreed. According to the report, Russia should also not continue with plans to fire 205,000 military officers, nor liquidate warrant officers from the military. The working group argued that it was not possible for Russia to have an army that was composed of 70 percent

contract soldiers. It also recommended turning over responsibility for military reform to the State Duma so reform could be carried out publicly, rather than "secretly" in the MOD. Indeed, Nezavisimaya Gazeta reported the Russian Security Council will meet to discuss the pace of military reforms. An unnamed source in the Kremlin was quoted as saying military reforms will be slowed down as the GOR reassesses their efficacy.

15. (U) Vedomosti, however, quoted an unnamed MOD official as saying this report reflected the opinion of many officers dissatisfied with Serdyukov's reforms. A local crisis may deprive Serdyukov of the financial resources needed to continue reforming the military (reftel).

Makarov Talks Tough

16. (U) In a June 5 press conference, CHOD Nikolay Makarov=QOQ6rre. For example, the Russian Army is already halfway to meeting its goal of having 76 permanent readiness brigades, and is expected to meet this goal by the end of this year.

MOSCOW 00001496 002 OF 002

Experts Skeptical of Reports

17. (C) Experts not involved in the Duma report dismissed reports of Serdyukov's imminent dismissal and the slowing down of military reform as simply an attempt by critics to air their grievances. They shared the opinion that the GOR was unlikely to listen to the recommendations put forth by the working group of Duma Deputies and military experts. Such reports were unlikely to have any significant effect on Serdyukov and his military reform plans, they posited. Serdyukov, they added, still had the support of Medvedev and Putin, and will continue carrying out much-needed reform of the military despite protests from some quarters.

Comment

18. (C) Serdyukov's reforms aim to end Russia's 300-year practice of relying on mass mobilization to defend the country and instead rely on high-tech weaponry and mobility. Because these reforms represent such a departure from well-established practice, they will continue to meet opposition. As long as Serdyukov enjoys the support of Medvedev and Putin, however, his job will remain secure and reforms will continue.

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